

William Thomas Lake

Rifleman S/14149, 12th Battalion Rifle Brigade (The Prince Consort's Own)

William Thomas Lake was born on 25 July 1890, the first son of William Thomas and Elizabeth Ann Lake, living at Wybourn's Cottages, Charles Street, Deptford, London. William junior was baptised at the Parish Church of St Paul, Deptford on 10 September 1890 taking his father's given names as was quite usual. His father's occupation was recorded as "labourer".

Deptford, nudging its neighbour Greenwich, is steeped in maritime history. Ships docked and unloaded there; foreigners came to learn the art of shipbuilding and sailors left to sail to the far corners of the empire.

Charles Booth the social researcher writing of his walk through the Parish of St Paul, Deptford in the company of Police Sergeant Goddard some ten years later, records that in Charles Street "On west side at north end is Wybourn's Cottages. A row of four two-roomed cottages, Italian ice cream vendors". He notes that it is an area in which lived the poor labouring class including "decorators, manglers etc". He also comments that the "Italians are coming in".



A street in Deptford, London late 1890's

In 1901 the family, then with six children, was still living in the area. William junior had been a pupil at Stanley Street School, Deptford and latterly at Lucas Street School, Lewisham. By 1911 however, at the age of 21, he was shown living as a boarder at Chestnut Cottage, Amersham Common, Buckinghamshire with the family of James Henry Jones. He was single and his occupation was jobbing gardener.

It is not known what brought William to Amersham, unless perhaps it was a move to search for work and a better life. It is also not known how he met Ethel Katherine McGrath whom he was to marry in Amersham in the quarter ending December 1915.

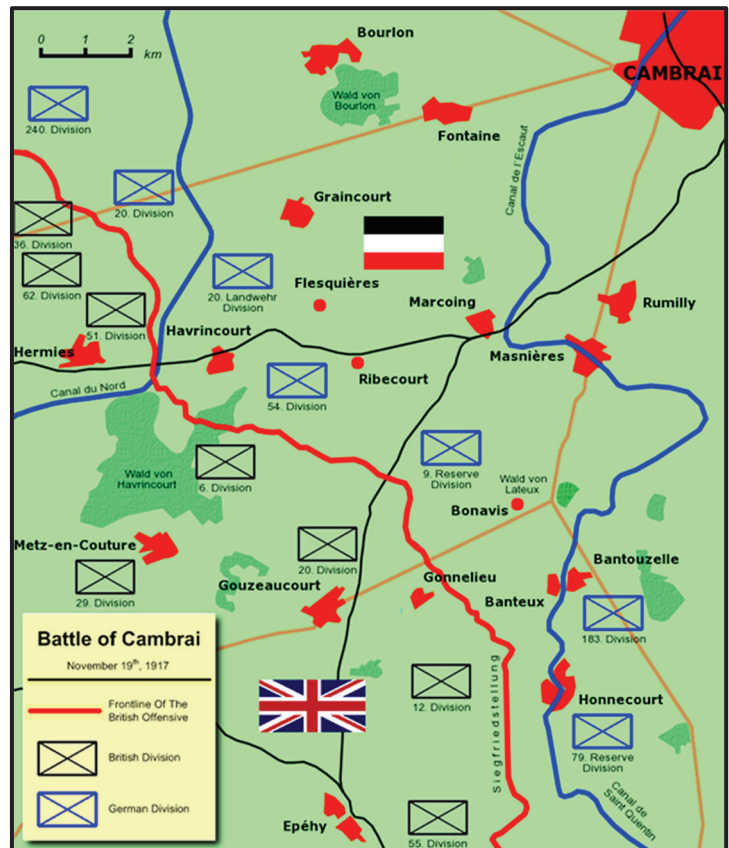
It would seem that, on his first attempt to enlist for military service, William was rejected, possibly due to having a "weak chest". However, a further application succeeded and he joined the 12th (Service) Battalion, The Rifle Brigade, signing the attestation documents at Aylesbury, Bucks.

The Battalion had been formed at Winchester in September 1914. It was a Battalion of the 60th Brigade, 20th (Light) Division and part of Kitchener's Second New Army, K2. It remained in England for training until midway through the following year when it embarked for France and landed at Boulogne on 22 July 1915. It was soon to take part in **the Battle of Loos** in late September 1915, a major British offensive and the first mass engagement of New Army units. It was the first occasion on which the British forces had made use of poison gas, releasing huge quantities of chlorine, some of which was blown back across their own trenches. British casualties during the whole battle were in excess of 60,000 with almost 8,000 men dying. New Army units were particularly hard hit with the men being rushed into the conflict for the first time only a matter of days after landing in France.

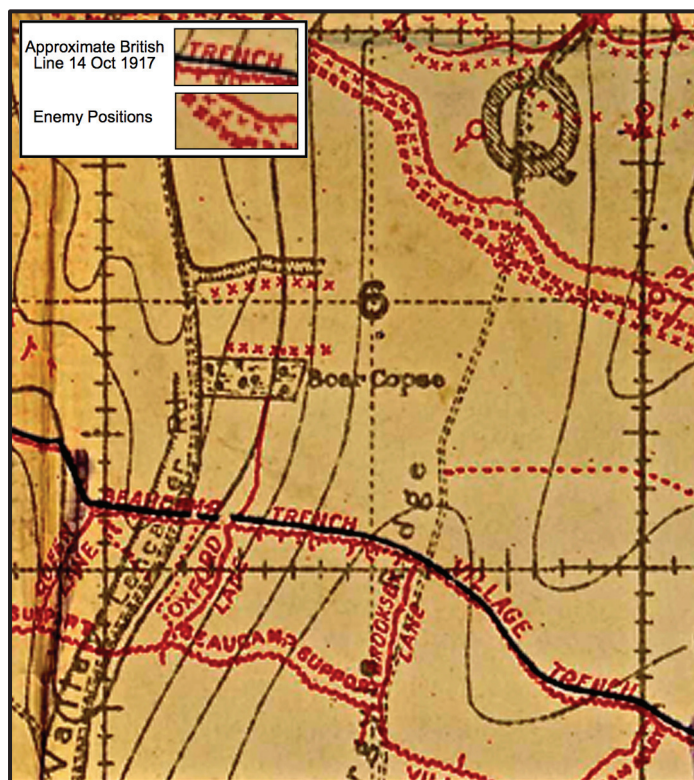
William joined the Battalion in France in February 1916 and would have been with the 20th (Light) Division as it continued its actions on the Western Front, through 1916 into late 1917. It fought at **Mount Sorrel, Guillemont, Flers-Courcellette, Merval, Le Transloy, Messines and the Third Battle of Ypres or Passchendaele.** He must have been involved in many of these engagements and one can only imagine his experiences during two years of this terrible war.

Towards the end of October 1917, the 12th Battalion was positioned close to Gouzeaucourt to the south-west of Cambrai as part of the build-up poised for the planned attack on the German Hindenberg Line to be launched on 20 November.

The four Companies of the Battalion were employed in improving their trenches and paying special attention to the siting of the (barbed) wire. The *War Diary* entry for 2 November remarks: "Nothing unusual occurred today. Work went on the same and the usual patrols went out at night".



Cambrai – Order of Battle 19 November 1917
(Courtesy of Wikipedia)



Trench Map Portion Q.6 Courtesy: McMaster University Library

REMARKS AND INFORMATION
<p>Left Line at Q.6.0.25.18 at 4.45 p.m. and proceeded to N.E. corner of BOAR COPSE, Q.6.0.7.8. Arrived there at 5.20 p.m. We then waited in formation for enemy patrol.</p> <p>About 5.45 p.m. a line of men walked in file up N. side of COPSE. When about 12 men had passed, the order was given for rapid fire. After short skirmish, the enemy were driven off.</p> <p>We then rallied in a deep shell hole at Q.6.0.7.7. Party of five then proceeded to collect in wounded.</p> <p>While doing this a man was seen approaching. He was challenged and failing to answer was shot. A machine gun was picked up. We then proceeded back to our line with one of our men badly wounded, and two with slight wounds, one of the enemy badly wounded, one enemy machine gun and one enemy rifle. We left behind three of the enemy dead.</p> <p>We entered our line at Q.6.0.45.18. The two badly wounded subsequently died in our trenches. No identifications found;</p>

Patrol Report 3rd November 1917

The entry for the following day notes that what was described as a "very successful patrol" went out and the incident, in which one officer and sixteen other ranks took part, is described more fully in the

“Patrol Report” for 3 November 1917. The “Objective or Task” is entered simply as “Fighting”!

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The British soldier who died of his wounds that day, 3 November 1917, was S14149, Rifleman William Thomas Lake, aged 27. He was laid to rest at Fins New British Cemetery, Sorel-le-Grand, Somme, France.



Fins New British Cemetery, Sorel-le-Grand, Somme, France, Grave Ref: II. B. 2.
Photographs: Chalmers Cursley

The inscription below the cross, placed there at the request of William’s family, reads:

‘DEEP IN OUR HEARTS YOU LIVE DEAR BY MEMORY OFT RECALLED FROM HOME’

At the time of William’s death, Ethel was pregnant with their child and she returned to Greenwich where she lived with William’s mother. She gave birth to a daughter there on 1 June 1918. Kathleen Elizabeth Mercer Lake was sadly not to know her father but doubtless she would learn his story and be proud of him.

William received The British War Medal, 1914-18 and The Allied Victory Medal.

William Thomas Lake is remembered with Honour
and is buried at Fins New British Cemetery,
Sorel-le-Grand, Somme, France,
Grave Ref: II. B. 2.

William Thomas Lake is also remembered on the memorial at The Free Church, Amersham.

Sources:

St Paul, Deptford, Parish Records, *Register of Baptisms* 1890, Page 72, Entry No. 571
The Long, Long Trail
National Archives WO 95/2121 12th (Service) Battalion, The Rifle Brigade, *War Diaries*
Wikipedia
Mr Martin Smith, grandson of William Thomas Lake
Charles Booth Online Archive B368 pp40-41 (boothlse.ac.uk)